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Introducing Plurals

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Biography
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Introducing Plurals

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Abstract
This paper introduces to the philosophical literature on personal identity a new candidate case of multiple persons in one body. *Plurals* are human beings who identify as multiple persons sharing a brain. I unpack the meaning of the plural identity claim and attempt to say something about its phenomenological basis. I argue that it makes sense to delineate plurals in terms of their shared identity, despite plurals' etiological diversity, and offer some possible explanations for the overlap between plural, trans, and autistic populations. The paper neither defends nor rejects the plural identity claim, but argues that, on the one hand, it is not clearly delusional, and, on the other hand, that there is a difficulty with trying to make sense of it from a third-person perspective.

Keywords: Personal Identity, Psychiatry, Dissociative Phenomena, Unity of Consciousness, Phenomenology

1 Introduction

The two real-life hard cases that figure most heavily in the philosophical literature on personal identity are the split-brain phenomenon on the one hand and dissociative identity disorder (DID) on the other. Human beings from these populations are generally taken to be the best candidate cases of multiple persons in one body, because of a common feature the conditions share: systematic causal dissociations between ordinarily integrated, personal-level psychological states.

This paper will focus on and introduce to the philosophical community a population that substantially overlaps with but is distinct from the DID population. This population, which I will call *plurals,* raises the issue of personal identity not first and foremost because its members are subject to causal dissociations between personal-level psychological states but rather because they themselves explicitly identify as multiple people sharing one brain. Or, rather—speaking more carefully though admittedly more awkwardly—a plural is a human being out of whose mouth issues the identity claim (or whose brain produces the avowed belief whose content is expressed by the sentence), "I am one of multiple people in this brain." I call this the *plural identity claim*.

The population of plurals is unknown to most philosophers and poses several problems of understanding. First, I'll articulate the features of plural identity and describe the different etiologies of plurals, while arguing that despite their etiological diversity, it makes sense to delineate this population in terms of their shared identity. I will discuss possible explanations for the substantial overlap between plural, trans, and autistic populations.

Without arguing that the plural identity claim is true, I will try to characterize its meaning and phenomenological basis, and will defend it from two objections according to which the claim needn't be seriously investigated. The goal, throughout, is to sketch a kind of philosophical problem space around this population.

2 Preliminaries

My focus in this paper will be on human beings in the West who meet the criteria that I specify for being plural. There may be, in other cultures, human beings who would also say that their bodies are shared or inhabited somehow by multiple people, and such human beings may differ significantly from the human beings I discuss here. It would make sense to distinguish them, since human beings in very different cultures might be expected to possess very different concepts relevant to the self-belief specified in the doxastic criterion for being a plural, and this difference might in turn affect their experiences and ways of living.

The population of plurals focused on here overlaps substantially but not entirely with the population of human beings with dissociative identity disorder (DID). Human beings with DID are often called multiples, partly because the condition was once named "multiple personality disorder," but also because a striking feature of the condition is the experiencing of oneself as psychologically multiple in some way. It would be difficult to make clear what experiences of multiplicity are, and they are probably diverse; I will say more about the phenomenology of multiplicity at other points in the paper. Crucially, the self-beliefs of multiples are also diverse and only some multiples end up explicitly identifying as multiple persons.

I define being plural first and foremost doxastically: a plural is a human being who explicitly *believes* that there are in fact multiple persons sharing their brain. I call this belief *plural identity,* though some further elements must be specified to give its precise intended meaning. (Note that I am offering my own account of what it is to be a plural; plurals themselves arguably use the term "plural" synonymously with the term "system," which I define below.)

Some of the research drawn on in this paper is academic research of a traditional sort, including psychological and philosophical literature on DID. While much of that literature is relevant to plurals in some way, it does tend to lump together subjects who are very diverse with respect to their own self-conceptions. The core idea of this paper is that there is a philosophically, psychologically, and sociologically interesting population here properly delineated in terms of its members' self-conceptions. But there is very little academic literature on that population, so defined.

Fortunately, the paper is also able to draw on some sources that were not available to prior philosophical thinking about candidate cases of multiple persons in one body. Much of the philosophical literature on DID was written closer to the 1990s (Dennett and Humphrey 1989; Braude 1995; Hardcastle, Flanagan, and Institute 1999; Radden 1996; Sinnott-Armstrong and Behnke 2000), and since then, the internet exploded: many online resources and communities have sprung up around and for self-identified multiples and plurals, and these online sources offer important phenomenological and anthropological evidence.

In addition, I have had opportunities to speak with a number of plurals about their beliefs, lives, and experiences. These (recorded and transcribed) conversations do not qualify as scientific research per se, since I have no training in interview research. (I attempted something like semi-structured interviews but did not code them afterwards.) I also did not attempt to recruit a representative sample: the plurals I interviewed volunteered for the project after learning of it at one of a number of online communities for plurals, where an advertisement to participate in my research was posted by a plural who had contacted me after I published a popular piece on what it means to respect plural identities. Despite this haphazard method of recruitment, however, the plurals I interviewed were more diverse along certain dimensions—both age and race/ethnicity—than I had expected.[1]

Still, the present work does to some extent run ahead of the data, and it would be a happy outcome if it helped motivate further research. Towards that end, the paper introduces a number of concepts and distinctions useful in thinking about this new area of study.

Often, the language I employ in discussing plurals may seem to simply assume the metaphysics that plurals themselves endorse, according to which each plural human being is somehow associated with multiple persons. My intention in using that language, however, is not to beg any metaphysical questions, and in fact the paper does not argue that the plural identity claim is true. Indeed, many or most of the interesting philosophical (not to mention sociological and psychological) questions raised by the phenomenon of plural identity don't closely concern the metaphysics of plurals at all. One reason to employ the language that plurals use to describe themselves is that the plural identity claim will likely be challenging for many philosophers to comprehend, and I believe that employing language that assumes plurals' own perspectives makes it easier to understand what and who they claim to be. In addition, language that sounded more metaphysically neutral would often be hopelessly awkward. It is no surprise that plural communities are

1. In this respect, they were consistent with the participants in Turell et al.'s (2023) interview research with transgender plurals: of the first fifteen who replied and met criteria in that study, about a third were white, about a third were mixed race/ethnicity, and of the remaining four, two were Asian and two were African American; their (bodily) ages meanwhile ranged from 18 to 38. That study similarly used community-based participatory research design.

themselves sources of terminology that enable their lives and their beliefs to be more easily understood and less awkwardly described. That said, there are also points at which I make terminological choices that are not (or not routinely) made by plurals themselves, since I need terminology that reflects and refers to the specifically *philosophically* relevant distinctions drawn in this paper. I will try to flag, as much as possible, what precisely I mean to commit myself to in utilizing one term or another.

3 Who and What Are Plurals?

Although the term "multiple" is usually used to refer to a human being with dissociative identity disorder (DID), I will instead take a multiple to be any human being who routinely has *experiences as of* there being other psychological beings present with them in their body or brain, regardless of whether or not they "have DID" (which itself could mean different things, depending on how closely one hews to current diagnostic criteria). In this paper, then, multiples are phenomenologically defined, while plurals are doxastically defined: plurals actually *believe* that there are multiple persons sharing their brain.

Most readers of this paper are, I assume, *singlets:* human beings who neither *believe* that they are multiple persons in one body nor are subject to "*experiences* of being or having, more than one individual within a single body" (Garrett 2023, emphasis added). So, as I will use the term, a singlet is someone who is neither plural nor multiple.[2]

I have defined multiples as human beings who *feel* as though they are psychologically multiple somehow. This feeling appears to be genuinely phenomenological, rather than just an inference drawn from their phenomenology: that is, while a multiple with DID may, for instance, find themselves behaving in ways they don't understand, perhaps (tenuously) supporting the inference that some of their actions aren't their own, multiples also *feel* as though something they are doing or something they are hearing in their mind is not really them but is rather someone or something else.[3]

This feeling of being multiple somehow is a striking feature of dissociative identity disorder. The most recent version of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual for Mental Disorders—the DSM-V-TR—lists DID as one of several dissociative disorders, and gives as its first two and most distinctive diagnostic criteria for the condition:

2. Some plurals use the term "singlet" to also include to multiples that aren't plurals (Stronghold 2021); I'm not sure how common that usage is. Note that either way, within the plural community and the multiples community, being multiple and being a singlet are not considered to be exhaustive options; *medians* are at least one intermediary category. Medians however are not plurals as I define them, and I will not discuss them here.

3. Braude's (1995) analysis of multiplicity is still very helpful and addresses both its cognitive and phenomenological aspects.

A. Disruption of identity characterized by two or more distinct personality states… The disruption in identity involves marked discontinuity in sense of self and sense of agency, accompanied by related alterations in affect, behavior, consciousness, memory, perception, cognition, and/or sensory-motor functioning. These signs and symptoms may be observed by others or reported by the individual.
B. Recurrent gaps in the recall of everyday events, important personal information, and/or traumatic events that are inconsistent with ordinary forgetting. (American Psychiatric Association 2022)

Like those of many other disorders listed in the DSM, the diagnostic criteria for DID also require that the symptoms "cause clinically significant distress or impairment in social, occupational, or other important areas of functioning" (American Psychiatric Association 2022).

Criterion A's reference to "discontinuity in sense of self and sense of agency" may not clearly describe the felt sense of *multiple* psychological beings. This striking feature of DID is, however, targeted by some clinical measures, such as the "I have parts" items on Dell's (2006a) Multidimensional Inventory of Dissociation, and I will assume that multiples include all people with dissociative identity disorder. This assumption may not be correct and is not crucial in what follows. What is crucial is that plurals are a subset of multiples.

3.1 Plural Identity

It is pragmatically necessary to have a term to refer to the different beings that a plural believes are sharing their brain. The clinical term for such beings in someone with DID would be "alters," but plurals themselves often dislike this term for being "dehumanizing" (depersonalizing):

> …they are not 'my alter.' No one is an 'alternate' to myself. We are a group of people. (The Blackbirds, n.d.)

A commonly used alternative is the term "headmates"—like "housemates," except sharing a head instead of a house. (The term "head" here is helpfully neutral between whether headmates are believed to share or experienced as sharing a brain, a skull, or perhaps even a mind in some way.) I will use the term "headmates" myself, although without meaning to beg the question of whether headmates are *entities*, as the term suggests, or whether they are instead more property-like. Plurals often refer to the collection of headmates associated with one body or brain as a *system,* and I will sometimes use this language as well. (Headmates are therefore sometimes called "systemmates" instead.) Note that while I use

the term "plural" to refer to a *human being* with a particular identity, the term "system" is slightly different, referring instead to the collection of headmates all associated with one particular plural.

The seemingly unitary criterion for being plural that I propose—believing that one is one of multiple persons in one's body or brain—involves a belief or network of beliefs that is in fact complex and that can itself be articulated in terms of five features.

The first feature of plural identity is that it is in part phenomenologically grounded: a plural doesn't just *believe* that there are multiple psychological beings sharing their brain but has experiences as of these multiple beings. A headmate may for instance experience their body as performing actions or "hear" thoughts in inner speech or be directly aware of emotional responses that register to them phenomenologically as *someone's* but also as *not-mine* or *not-me*.

The second feature of plural identity is that—unlike some multiples—plurals in fact *believe* that there are multiple such beings sharing their brain. Indeed, I am taking plural identity to be a fairly explicit self-belief, especially, as we will see, a belief that has implications for how they live their lives.

Third, plurals accept that the multiple beings whom they believe are sharing their brain are in fact *persons:* they believe that these beings—whom they call people—can have personalities, preferences, varying degrees of agency (including moral agency), self-consciousness, and, crucially, rights:

> We have a very strong commitment to operating collectively and look viewing each other [sic] as persons with equal dignity and deserving our existence. We make decisions by a process of consensus, which is not unanimity. (Turell et al. 2023, 5; quoting Jesse System)

But—and this is the fourth feature distinctive of plural identity—a plural does not believe that the overarching system or the human being as a whole is itself a person, except perhaps in a metaphorical sense. Contrary, then, to what some of the language used so far may have suggested, a plural human being does *not* make first-person singular statements to the effect that he is the *collection* of people inside him. That is, a plural does not say, "I am multiple people sharing one brain." Rather, a plural human being will say either, "I am one of multiple people sharing this brain" or "We are a group of people sharing a brain." Either way, a plural possesses one or more beliefs whose content is expressed in the first-personal sentence, "I am just one of multiple people here":

> Fundamental to properly understanding what I'm trying to convey is the proper placement of the "I." *I* call myself One. *I* am writing this letter. *I* am only myself; *I* have

> one identity, one sense of self, one personality. Although I am conjoined inseparably from the other members of my group, when I am not on [sic?] front [not controlling behavior] my own "I" is no longer there; I am in a state like sleep; some other person now walks around in our body. Someone who has their own "I," their own internal narrative, their own wants and desires. When they step away from the front, yet another "I" will take their place…If someone can understand that essential fact at the heart of what multiplicity is, then phrases like "your other selves," or "when you were that other person," or "the other you" become obvious non-sequiturs. I don't have "other selves." *I* am never anyone but myself. (One Fox Faraday 2015, original emphasis)

Again, what a plural claims is that within their brain there are multiple headmates, each of whom thinks, *of that very headmate,* and not of the others, "I am *this* person." Analogously, I believe of my sister and I that *we* are multiple persons; I also believe, of Elizabeth Schechter, that *I* am *this* person; I certainly don't believe that *I* am *us*. A plural might express this fourth feature of plural identity by saying something like "I'm so-and-so, and I have three headmates, so there are four of us in our system."

This fourth feature is arguably entailed by the third: groups aren't literally persons, since they have some but not all necessary features of persons. (For instance, groups aren't sentient.) Therefore, to the extent that a plural believes that her headmates really are distinct and genuine persons, she won't also believe that *all* of them jointly constitute *one* literal person.[4]

It follows that earlier and future references to what a plural *says* or *feels* or *believes* are inevitably ambiguous. Sometimes it can mean simply that there is at least one headmate within that system who says (etc.) such-and-such. Sometimes it means that all of them jointly say or would say such-and-such, or that a majority would say so. In talking to a plural, it is not always clear which headmate is speaking, nor is it always clear whom is being spoken for. Indeed, this may not be clear to the very headmate speaking. Headmates often shift back and forth between the first-person singular and the first-person plural to indicate how widely within the system their perspective is shared. But sometimes a headmate may not know how widely shared is their perspective on something, much less exactly which other headmates share it. There is no way around this linguistic ambiguity in discussing what plurals think and say and so on, and this ambiguity should be kept in mind going forwards.

4. Some plurals think of the system itself as something with its own quasi-psychological properties, but, again, not exactly as a person. One headmate told me that their mental image of their system was as something like a giant gear somehow *enabling* interactions between headmates.

The ambiguity also pertains to the plural identity claim itself. So as not to beg any metaphysical questions, I have defined the claim in an awkward way: the claim ("I am one of multiple persons in this brain") issues from a human being, but if what plurals say about themselves is true, the human being is not the claim's proper maker. To plurals, the truth of the plural identity claim, for a particular human being, in fact requires that there are, within that human being somehow, at least two *potential* makers of that very claim. Within the plural community, plural identity may be understood as something closer to a collective identity: "We are multiple persons sharing this brain." If there is no *we*—if, contrary to the plural themselves, only one of those persons in fact exists—then plurals themselves would consider the identity to be mistaken. Indeed, plurals themselves seem to use the term "plural" as a synonym for "system": it applies only to a collection of systemmates, and if plurals as *I* define them are wrong and systemmates do not really exist —except as distinct property-clusters of one person—then there *are* no systems and no plurals, as *they* define them.[5]

I have not made the same terminological choice here and have instead taken a plural to be a human being who has a certain self-belief, whether or not that belief is true. (If the belief is false, then then it is the human being—or the sole person that human being constitutes—who believes it; if the belief is true, then the human being is merely associated with it somehow, its brain being the brain of the headmate who is its proper believer.) I have done that partly so as not to beg any metaphysical questions and also to leave open the possibility for an argument that a plural's self-belief itself grounds the truth of plural identity. That is, rather than defining "plural" in such a way that it is an open metaphysical question whether plurals exist (or whether instead some human beings just think that they do), I have defined "plural" such that plurals uncontroversially exist—they are human beings who identify as multiple persons sharing a brain—and this leaves space for the possibility that plural identity partly *grounds* the truth of the plural identity claim.

The fifth and final defining feature of plural identity is this: because each headmate thinks of themselves as a person sharing a brain or body with other people, each therefore conceives of their (that is, his or her or their) relations to the others as essentially *interpersonal*—rather than intrapersonal—in nature.

Consider the attitude of *liking someone*. This is first and foremost an attitude a person can have towards another. We do sometimes speak of liking or disliking oneself, but this usage is arguably metaphorical, the concept applying only partially in the reflexive

5. There is a difficulty here which I'm not sure how to get around: what about a system only one of whose headmates endorses the plural identity claim? (This is theoretically possible; I did for instance speak to one system of about ten headmates, one of whom insisted that they must all be parts of one person.) Relative to the way I've laid out the criterion for being a plural, such a human being *would* count as a plural, but I'm not sure plurals themselves would agree; perhaps this hypothetical edge case shows the limits of my approach.

case. For instance, I can't imagine liking someone without in any way enjoying their company, and I wouldn't know how to answer whether I enjoy my own company, unless this just means to ask how contented I feel during the times when I don't have company. In just the same way—from what I can tell—a headmate might be more readily able to say whether she likes one of her systemmates than whether she likes herself. Different headmates speak of liking or disliking, respecting or disparaging, cooperating and arguing and negotiating with each other. Conflict within a headmate (i.e., ambivalence) tends to be experienced differently from conflict between headmates. Systemmates feel gratitude and resentment towards each other—in a way that I don't feel gratitude towards the self-of-yesterday who packed today's healthy lunch (even if I am grateful that I packed lunch) or resentment towards the part-of-me-that's-capable-of-delayed-gratification for not "allowing" me to spend my whole paycheck (even if I resent that I have to economize). Some pairs of headmates are friends with each other; some pairs are not presently on speaking terms; some may be romantically and even sexually attracted to each other; others may deny that they feel attracted to each other only because of their own internalized homophobia (Riesman 2019)!

I have just offered five features that define plural identity or self-belief. This account is only provisional, however. In particular, I have set things up such that a phenomenological element is essential to having a plural identity in the relevant sense, but I am not confident that this is the correct choice. Certainly, a merely theoretical belief that one is one of multiple people in one's body is not enough to be a member of the population of interest: suppose that, in order to resolve a paradox of personal identity that I've been struggling with, I am led to conclude that there must already be multiple persons in my body even now, and that I am just one of them; I would nonetheless not have a plural identity of the sort of interest here. But it is unclear whether this is only or even primarily because my belief that I was one of multiple people in my body would not be grounded in phenomenology, or rather because I would lack further beliefs about these postulated multiple persons that plurals possess; for instance, even if I concluded, on a purely theoretical basis, that I was one of multiple people in this body, this needn't dispose me to try to communicate with them or even think that it was possible to relate to them in genuinely interpersonal ways.

Provisionally, however, I have chosen to delineate the relevant population in partly phenomenological terms—and to be fair, all the plurals I've spoken to have described atypical phenomenological experiences of their bodies and of their (brain's) thoughts, experiences, and/or behaviors. That phenomenology overlaps that described by the criteria for depersonalization/derealization disorder in the DSM. The phenomenology of depersonalization is characterized by "Experiences of unreality, detachment, or being an outside observer with respect to one's thoughts, feelings, sensations, body, or actions (e.g., per-

ceptual alterations, distorted sense of time, unreal or absent self, emotional and/or physical numbing)"; the phenomenology of derealization is characterized by "Experiences of unreality or detachment with respect to surroundings (e.g., individuals or objects are experienced as unreal, dreamlike, foggy, lifeless, or visually distorted)" (American Psychiatric Association 2022). Experiences of depersonalization and derealization are not so uncommon (see Michal et al. [2011] and Žikić, Ćirić, and Mitković [2009]). But commonly one experiences oneself as, as it were, detached from one's body or actions or even emotions —as though they were not one's own, perhaps, and thus in that derivative sense someone else's—without having any sense (or believing) that there is, simultaneously, within one's body, another being for who those actions and emotions feel like their own. Section 6 will say a little more about the phenomenology of multiplicity as a (partial) source of plural identity.

Plural identity itself is, however, first and foremost doxastic. Within this doxastic element, there will still be some diversity. I have required the belief to be an explicit or conscious one, for instance, but explicitness and consciousness arguably come in degrees; in some cases the belief could perhaps be closer to a background assumption structuring one's emotional life and decision-making, while in other cases it could be a very explicit theoretical belief, arrived at after a deliberative process of attempting to make sense of one's experiences; in other cases it is a kind of a sociopolitical identity, which forms the basis for organizing and activism alongside other plurals:

> The solution to medicalists in the plural community is much the same as the solution to similar attitudes in the trans community. Activism and visibility. Non-disordered, non-traumagenic, and mixed-origin systems must keep speaking out and sharing experiences. This is vital.[6] (RSpacefox 2021)

> [We] like the idea of like trying to spread awareness and education and all that. We love that and because we are very involved in disability justice, we think it's very important. (Turell et al. 2023, 7; quoting Finley System)

In short, I take plural identity to be a partially phenomenologically grounded belief whose content, expressed in the third-person singular, is that one is one of multiple people in one's body or brain, to whom one can relate in (many) ordinary interpersonal ways, and who are neither parts of one's own person nor collectively constitutive of a unitary (genuine) person of whom one is also partially constitutive.

6. This paper often pulls from blogs, online forums, Tweets, etc., that contain obvious typos. These have been fixed, for readability, when there is no concern that they will affect the meaning. For example, some posts said "they're" when they meant "their", etc.

3.2 Plural Etiology

I assume plurals include many human beings with dissociative identity disorder (DID), but not all or even necessarily most. Some multiples with DID experience themselves as being psychologically multiple but do not seem to believe that they are; many identify, in some ultimate sense, with all of their "parts"—or, if they really don't identify with them, they don't, at least, view them as *persons*. Note that this may not be because of, say, any differences in basic phenomenology between plurals and non-plurals with DID. The classic *clinical* perspective, after all, is that DID involves a single fragmented person, rather than a multiplicity of genuine people, and that healing consists of the progressive integration of this person into a psychic whole, and many human beings with DID have adopted this clinical perspective. This perspective is of course precisely what plurals reject:

> On the matter of being "whole": I'm already whole as a person, and the act of smashing the rest of us into an idealized single person wouldn't even work. We're all separate, with fully developed personalities and interests. We're individuals, and prefer to be treated as such. (Flynn 2011)

Many multiples with DID therefore are not plurals. Conversely, there are plurals who do not have DID. (See Figure 1.) Of those plurals who don't have DID, many once met diagnostic criteria but no longer do, while remaining multiple. They may cease to meet criteria because they no longer meet the distress/impairment criterion; on clinicians' parts, the judgment as to whether or not a multiple merits the diagnosis of DID will probably especially often concern whether the client's multiplicity *per se* is impairing them (see e.g., Vignettes 3 and 6 in Ribáry et al. [2017]). But plurals may also not meet diagnostic criteria because they no longer meet the amnesia criterion as the latter is framed, since multiple headmates may share their knowledge and experiences with each other (more on this below). Some plurals identify with the diagnosis to the extent that they believe that their system was produced by trauma—a major factor in the etiology of DID—but claim that they never strictly met diagnostic criteria. (At least, as they understand them; one can't always say what clinicians would have said, since some plurals have not come into contact with the psychiatric profession or have gone only to seek treatment for, say, one or more headmates' depression.)[7]

7. The paper assumes (although nothing really hinges on this) the traumagenic model of DID. The other best known model of DID is the sociocognitive model, which basically posits that DID is iatrogenic. It may be that there are two stages of DID, with the traumagenic model explaining the first stage and sociocognitive factors explaining the second stage, which might be called the "social stage" of the disorder, at which point what has previously been experienced as, say, voices, or inexplicable and foreign-feeling emotions, begin to be conceptualized as in some sense socially real individuals. The classic sociocognitive model does not

Of course, if one takes being a singlet, with a singlet's phenomenology, to be *normative,* then all multiples—including all plurals—will inevitably meet the first diagnostic criterion for DID. But without this assumption, some multiples will not meet the first criterion either. From the standpoint of plurals, in particular, the claim that they experience "discontinuity in [their] sense of self and sense of agency" (American Psychiatric Association 2022) just begs the question: headmate H1 may experience no discontinuity in her sense of self or agency while headmate H2 may experience no discontinuity in his sense of self or agency either. Of course, H1 doesn't have the sense of *being* H2 and doesn't feel as though H2's actions were *her* actions—but then, I don't have the sense of being my sister, and I don't feel as though her actions were my actions, and we don't take this to reflect discontinuities in my sense of self or agency because we just take it as given that my sister and I are different selves, different agents. But that is precisely what H1 and H2 claim to be.

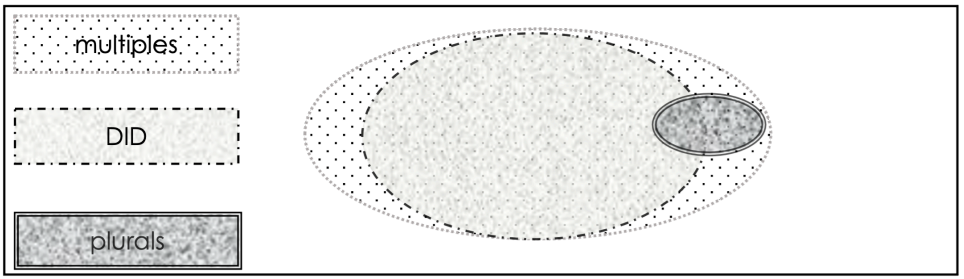

Figure 1: Three overlapping populations: multiples, DID, and plurals. Multiples include but are not limited to human beings with DID. I assume in the paper that all human beings with DID are multiples, but nothing hinges on that here. All plurals are multiples, but not all multiples are plurals. Some but not all plurals have DID. (Figure not drawn to scale.)

Importantly, there are also systems that don't have their origin in trauma to begin with. Some systems are intentionally created through so-called tulpamancy. Tulpamancy is a practice or set of practices undertaken with the intention of creating an autonomous sentient being "inside" (and of course using) one's brain; beings created in this way are called tulpas, and the people who created them are called tulpamancers. Tulpamancy has received a little popular media attention (Thompson 2014), but not much academic attention, although Vessière (2016) and Laursen (2019) are important exceptions. People engage in this practice for a diversity of reasons, ranging from simple curiosity to lone-

clearly distinguish between these two stages, however, whether because it identifies DID only with the second stage or whether because it believes that sociocognitive factors explain *both* stages. Note that the sociocognitive factors that the model appeals to are first and foremost therapist expectations. But it may be that there are other social, motivational, and conceptual sources of the development of the social stage, now that DID is more widely known.

liness and the perceived desirability of creating a companion that one can carry around inside oneself, in a sense.[8]

Then there are so-called "natural" or "endogenic" systems. Some claim that they were just always multiple people, without ever having experienced childhood trauma of the sort that is generally believed to be the precipitating factor for DID and without having intentionally and effortfully created headmates in the way that tulpamancers do; other natural systems say that while they have experienced such trauma—just as have many singlets—they were already multiple by that time. Natural systems' causal origins could perhaps just be some kind of neurobiological difference (or abnormality); alternatively, several systems I spoke to expressed the belief that *authors* may sometimes inadvertently create headmates in the process of vividly imagining fictional characters (see, on this note, Taylor, Hodges, and Kohányi [2003]). Note that this could be viewed either as inadvertent tulpamancy or—from the standpoint of a narrative account of the self—as just the same sort of process by which a singlet brain "creates" *one* person (Dennett 1992).

Systems, then, can have one of at least two and possibly three causal origins (see Table 1. Some are traumagenic, that is, caused by trauma and trauma-induced dissociation; these are the systems most likely to meet diagnostic criteria for DID, especially Criterion B. Some are intentionally created; these are what I am calling tulpagenic systems. Finally, there may be "natural" systems, the product neither of intentional effort nor of trauma and trauma-induced dissociation. However, since being a natural system is something of a diagnosis of exclusion, the status of this third type of etiology is less clear, and I won't discuss natural systems in what follows.

On the face of it, tulpagenic and traumagenic systems are very different etiologically, though the extent of this difference is difficult to resolve at present, when there remains ongoing debate about the nature of dissociation and the mechanisms of traumagenic DID. (Compare, for instance, Nijenhuis and Van Der Hart [2011] to critical responses to that article by Butler [2011], and by Dell [2011].) Certainly it may turn out that there are mechanisms common to both and even to non-pathological forms of dissociation. There can be other etiological overlaps as well, as when a multiple with DID intentionally creates just one of their headmates; additionally, both tulpagenic and traumagenic headmates may be modeled on fictional characters ("fictives") or on real people known to the plural ("introjects") or on versions of one's own (real or ideal) self (this list of options is not exhaustive)–the choice of model simply being more intentional in the case of tulpagenic systems. Still, systems do appear to have (at least) two broadly different etiologies:

8. Many people—including tulpagenic systems themselves—have expressed some discomfort with the use of the terms "tulpa," "tulpamancy," and so on, and have in some cases expressed negative attitudes towards Western practices of tulpamancy themselves, due to concerns about cultural appropriation (Mikles and Laycock [2015] discuss some of the relevant history and evolution in Western understanding of these originally Buddhist ideas). Convergence around an alternative set of terms has not yet emerged, however.

trauma-induced causal dissociation in the one case and in the other certain kinds of intentional imaginative and meditative practices.

System Type	Origin	DID Criteria	Other Characteristics
Traumagenic	Childhood trauma and trauma-induced dissociation	Likely to meet or have at one time met Criterion A, B, and/or C.	May have lived as multiples for a long time before identifying as plural. System may be very large.
Tulpagenic	Intentional effort to create one or more headmates	Likely does not meet criterion B or C; meets criterion A ("discontinuity in sense of self and sense of agency") only if being a singlet is normative.	Clear "original headmate" (tulpamancer). Since original headmate attempted to create other headmates (tulpas) with particular traits, headmates may be very similar. Less "dissociated" especially in distressing or impairing ways.
Natural	Unknown	Unknown	

Table 1: Types and origins of systems.

In terms of their internal system dynamics, tulpagenic and traumagenic systems tend to operate differently, with headmates in tulpagenic systems being much more aware of each other's thoughts and experiences and actions than they are in traumagenic systems. This is natural, since trauma is one cause of dissociation.

Nonetheless, when tulpamancy is successful, the tulpamancer experiences their tulpa or tulpas as being autonomous beings, just as occurs in traumagenic systems: so, although the tulpamancer will be aware of their tulpa's (say) actions, they will *feel* as though they (the tulpamancer) are not the agent of those actions. Phenomenologically, then, all plurals seem to share something.

There are interesting psychiatric connections between DID and non-traumagenic plurals: in particular, non-traumagenic plurals may have implications for the best methods of treating people with DID. DID is still commonly thought of as disordered not just because of amnesic and other (functionally impairing) dissociative symptoms, but also because it involves multiplicity per se. Indeed, some sort of fusing of the multitude of alters (headmates) into a single self is still widely viewed as the final stage of treatment, the sine qua non for full recovery. (Although I gather, anecdotally, that clinicians increasingly let patients take the lead in deciding when and even whether to ever pursue fusion.) The fact is, as Laursen (2019) says, that "Since the majority of people claim to have a single identity, there is a common cultural and psychiatric assumption that this is the most healthy, functional way of being" with "multiple identities tend[ing] to be viewed as problematic,

associated with pathological diagnoses" (172). But since tulpagenic plurals do not meet the diagnostic criterion for DID (nor perhaps for any mental disorder), they may show that being multiple, and even having a plural identity, is not in and of itself unhealthy.[9]

One might object that, since the DSM's criterion D for dissociative identity disorder requires that the disruption of identity referred to in criterion A not be a part of a "broadly accepted cultural or religious practice", tulpamancy cannot be relevant to evaluating the health of multiciplicity in DID—at least if one also thought that tulpamancy is such a practice; Laursen (2019), for one, simply states that it is. Admittedly, it might sound surprising to hear tulpamancy referred to as "broadly accepted," given that most readers won't even have heard of it—but on the other hand, who gets to say to which culture a tulpamancer belongs? The online tulpamancy community might itself be said to be one of many micro-communities and micro-cultures that have proliferated online.

But rather than showing that tulpagenic systems are irrelevant to evaluating the healthiness of multiplicity in DID, Criterion D's very existence might instead be said to frankly *acknowledge* that multiplicity *per se* is not necessarily disordered. And while it is true (I am assuming) that multiplicity in DID is caused by trauma, this too does not clearly impugn multiplicity in DID, since it cannot be assumed that every spontaneous response to trauma is itself unhealthy. These sorts of considerations at least raise the question of whether fusion needs to be even an ultimate or ideal outcome of DID treatment.

3.3 Plurals and Plural Identity

As just explained, there are differences between tulpagenic and traumagenic systems with respect to etiology and psychodynamics. From the standpoint of this paper, however, what distinguishes tulpagenic and traumagenic plurals is less important than what they share: endorsement of the plural identity claim. Traumagenic systems seem to be much more dissociated, and robust and systematic causal dissociations between personal-

9. This is not to say that tulpagenic plurals enjoy perfect mental health. Many self-report one or more mental health diagnoses, especially depression, anxiety, and ADHD (e.g., Shinyuu [2015]); indeed, a frequently cited reason for trying to create a tulpa is to ease feelings of loneliness that may be more prevalent in the mentally unwell; others state that they attempted to create a tulpa specifically to help deal with a mental health crisis (BenitoFlakes_ 2021). But loneliness, depression, anxiety, and ADHD are also common in the general population (and are higher in young people who are, unsurprisingly, also the ones most cognizant of and interested in tulpamancy in the first place). It is an interesting question whether the creation of one or more tulpas can be a healthy strategy for the depressed (or the merely lonely). Talking to a tulpa is a lot like "talking to God", and "talking to God" *can* be healthy (Zarzycka and Krok 2021). One might in fact worry that it works too well, disincentivizing a tulpamancer from seeking relationships with other *human beings*. But if the human mind truly is capable of seeing tulpas as people—and certainly if tulpas *are* people—then it's not clear that the distinction between socializing with people inside versus outside the system matters, from a mental health perspective. In any event, the important point is that tulpagenic systems' mental health problems may well *precede* (and perhaps contribute to) those systems' creation, rather than their systemhood *causing* (or constituting) such problems.

level mental states might themselves be argued to be the basis for a claim of multiple personhood. Self-identity, however, is another interesting potential basis, and I think there is some intuitive force behind the idea that it matters for personhood. Indeed, Vessière (2016) notes that in approving his interview research with tulpagenic systems—in which headmates are highly co-conscious—the review board "was concerned with the anonymity and protection of tulpa persons, as well as that of their hosts" (68).

Because *I* have delineated the class of plurals in terms of their explicit self-conception, plurals—again, as I define them—are not a natural kind, any more so than are, say, atheists. There may well be natural kinds relevant to the phenomenon of plural identity; dissociative identity disorder could be a natural kind, or it could turn out that there is a specific and scientifically explicable type of dissociative phenomenology systematically experienced by all and only plurals. It would also be possible to delineate the population differently, as the population of whom the plural identity claim were *true,* whether or not its members believed it: in that case, it could perhaps be debated whether members of that population (were there to be any) constituted a natural kind (the issue would partly depend on whether persons are a natural kind just in general).

But there are defensible reasons for a delineation based on self-conception. Many of the interesting philosophical, psychological, and sociological questions raised by plurals depend directly upon their identities. For instance, in what ways does conceiving of oneself as one of multiple persons sharing one's brain allow one to live differently, to relate to experiences of inner speech differently? Do plural identities themselves—and not the correctness of those identities—have ethical implications? What is the process by which learning about and hearing from other plurals comes to transform a human being's interpretation of their phenomenology, or even to transform that phenomenology itself? What sorts of practices or social contexts promote the stability of a plural identity, and are there practices or social contexts that make it likely that someone will lose that identity? Do plurals themselves have responses to the obvious philosophical arguments against the possibility of plural personhood? Is there a connection between the rise of tulpagenic plurals and the growing problem of social isolation (US Surgeon General 2023)?

There has been a little movement, recently, towards recognizing plurals, regardless of etiology, as a population. Turell et al. (2023) have published a paper on the experiences of transgender plurals of different etiologies. Christensen (2022) has a helpful paper on what she calls the *culture* of plurality, and although the paper explicitly focuses on DID plurals, she does (somewhat obliquely) mention tulpagenic plurals as well (2022, 3). Ribáry et al. 2017 present interview research with systems that seem to be uniquely traumagenic, but the authors define the population of interest in terms of their explicit self-identity (an identity that non-traumagenic systems may share, though Ribáry et al. [2017] recruited

self-identified *multiples* rather than *systems* or *plurals*). Laursen's (2019) article on tulpamancy helpfully relates tulpagenic plurals to plurals with DID.

It should be acknowledged that making the case for grouping some traumagenic and tulpagenic systems together on the basis of their explicit self-identity risks creating the impression of greater harmony between those systems than in fact exists. It is easy to find, online, groups of traumagenic plurals that deny the reality of non-traumagenic systems: from their standpoint, self-identified natural or intentional (tulpagenic) systems are in fact either unwittingly traumagenic or else mere appropriators who are not genuine systems at all. Against them stand non-traumagenic systems (and some allies) who decry their exclusion and accuse the former group of gatekeeping. The contours of this conflict —familiar from other contexts—are themselves interesting, but I set it aside here to focus on what unites all human beings who *claim* to be one of multiple persons in one head, regardless of their attitudes towards other such human beings.

It's natural to wonder the size of the population of plurals, but I do not know the answer. I know of one interview study of self-identified *multiples*, which estimated from online sources that there are "200-300 individuals who participate in these forums and believe they are multiple" (Ribáry et al. 2017). This estimate is surely too low, though, because the authors used only the search terms "multiplicity" and "multiple system," whereas at the time, on Twitter (now X) and Tumblr, terms like "collective" and #pluralgang were used at least as frequently. The term "multiples" also seems to me to be more strongly associated with DID specifically, and indeed the systems discussed in that paper all seem to be traumagenic. One can't judge prevalence just by looking at the number of posting members of online communities for plurals, meanwhile, since it is common for different systemmates to each have their own profile and create their own posts. At the same time, whatever the membership of these online communities, there are presumably many more plurals than participate in them, and—as Christensen (2022) argues—their numbers are likely to grow.

Whatever their numbers, however, the mere existence of online communities for plurals is of sociocultural interest. Popular media articles have been written (Riesman 2019; Thompson 2014); Plural Pride events have been organized. Plural activists have attempted to raise awareness and have requested a kind of social recognition *as* plurals. Liz Fong-Jones, a former Google employee (and well known enough to have been written about in prominent media articles, e.g. Fried [2019]) for a time self-identified as plural on Twitter (now X, which Fong-Jones has left). Fong-Jones also appears to have had a hand in writing a document called the *Plural Playbook* (Batman and Irene, n.d.), which is also publicly available online, that was supposedly distributed several years ago at Google, to introduce managers and employees to plurality and offer tips on how to respond when someone "comes out" as plural.

4 Overlaps with Other Populations

While I am not in a position to quantify the extent of the following overlaps, I have observed (and this is confirmed by Christensen [2022]) that the population of plurals overlaps significantly with two other populations: the trans population and the autistic population.[10] Presumably, singlets make up the large majority of transgender people and of autistic people. But among the plurals I've spoken to, a large majority of them had either received an autism diagnosis or had self-identified as autistic, and almost all of them had at least one headmate whose gender identity was not that associated with the gender their body was assigned at birth. Here I want to say something about the most obvious possible explanations for these overlaps.

4.1 Transgender and Plural

For the purposes of this section, I'll take a transgender headmate to be any headmate identifying as a gender other than the one associated with the sex their system's body was assigned at birth. This is an awkward way of speaking—we assign both sex and gender to human beings, not to their bodies—but of course headmates are not animals (and neither headmates nor systems exist at birth anyway, presumably). Note that such a headmate may not actually identify as specifically transgender, nor may their system; the relationship between transgender identity and headmates' gender identities is complex (see Turell et al. [2023]). But I will refer to a headmate who identifies as a man in system whose body was assigned female at birth as a transgender headmate (and *mutatis mutandis* for a headmate who identifies as a woman).

There is an obvious conceptual link between the person making a trans identity claim and the person making the plural identity claim: both believe that certain basic facts of embodiment commonly thought to *determine* aspects of personal identity are actually *not* so determinative. Until extremely recently in the West, one's gender was thought to be fully determined by physical facts about one's body, and that is still how everyone (or almost everyone) thinks about the *numerosity* of persons. It seems possible that once one relaxes the constraints between embodiment and identity in one of these cases, it makes it easier to relax them in the other case as well. (Something like this emerges as a theme

10. The autistic plurals I spoke to pretty much all rejected a disorder view of autism. Some of them therefore also rejected language suggesting that autism is a *condition*—the language, that is, of a *person with autism*—and instead conceptualized autism just as another way of being, using the language of *autistic people* instead. I use the same language in this paper.

of recent interview research with systems that identify as transgender in some way [Turell et al. 2023].)

The plurals I spoke to suggested a different explanation for the high occurrence transgender headmates, which is the association between being transgender (in a cis-centric world) and dissociation. An assigned-female-at-birth child who believes not just that their thoughts that they are a boy are factually incorrect but also that there is something wrong with the very fact of having such thoughts to begin with, will literally attempt to dissociate from those thoughts when they occur. And feelings of gender dysphoria are themselves so uncomfortable that they, too, create a temptation to dissociate; indeed, one could argue that gender dysphoria *is* a kind of dissociation—a feeling of alienation from one's body. Dissociation is both an aspect and a cause of multiplicity (which, given the right conceptual framework, becomes plural identity). Some of the transgender headmates I spoke to basically said that they tried *not* to experience or to think about their bodies—and again, it is the unity of the body, rather than the mind, that is ordinarily thought to be determinative of one's unicity as a person.

Another possible theory of the overlap may occur to some readers. Suppose that one is assigned male at birth but in some perhaps inchoate way thinks of oneself as or wants to be a girl, but suppose that one distances oneself from or actively disavows these thoughts and desires. Mightn't one then construct a headmate of the gender with which one inchoately identifies—as a kind of wish fulfillment, an ideal self—but while denying that the image so constructed was in fact of *one's own* self? I asked this question of two tulpagenic systems whose bodies were assigned male at birth. In each case, the tulpamancer initially identified (albeit not quite comfortably) as a boy or man; each then intentionally created a female-identified tulpa; each tulpamancer then at some point ceased identifying as a man (in one case coming to identify as a woman and in the other case as nonbinary). Both conceded that their (years) earlier decision to create a female tulpa might have had *something* to do with their own uncertain or confused gender identities. Still, they thought the connection was fairly indirect: their gender was something they were at least dimly aware of struggling with and of wanting to talk about, and they naturally wanted to have that conversation with someone gentle and accepting, and due to (they admitted) their own gender stereotypes, when they pictured someone gentle and accepting, they pictured a woman. But, they pointed out, the gradual shifts in their own gender identities did not make their female Tulpas feel less "necessary" or less *real*. So it wasn't as though approaching their "ideal selves" led to *merging* with their created companions or made those companions fade away.

A final obvious connection between transgender and plural populations is the internet. Transgender youth who feel isolated or aberrant at school or in other "real life" contexts may turn to online communities for social support and understanding, and *online*

is where one is likely to encounter plural communities as well. (It's where I learned of them.) Moreover, trans communities online may be more accepting of plural identities; indeed several transgender plurals I spoke to said that trans communities are both more likely to give weight to plurals' own plural identity claims out of deference to people's first-person epistemic authority but also—even when they don't necessarily believe those identity claims—more likely to treat them respectfully.

4.2 Autistic and Plural

It seems likely that an explanation of the overlap between the autistic and the plural community will need to refer to two different factors: phenomenological and other psychofunctional differences on the one hand and then a variety of social and doxastic or intellectual factors on the other hand. Indeed, there are many potential factors here deserving investigation.[11]

Some of the same explanations as above could be applied to explain why a disproportionate number of plurals are also autistic. Several of the autistic plurals I spoke to said that being autistic in an allistic (i.e., non-autistic) world is itself often traumatic—the traumas ranging from being misunderstood, to being uncomfortable in a physical and social environment not designed for people like oneself, to being actively mistreated, perhaps even by close caregivers—and trauma is a cause of dissociation. (See Reuben, Stanzione, and Singleton [2021] on autism and trauma.) Autistic people are also more prone to "sensory overload," and this itself can prompt dissociation as a coping mechanism.

There are potentially neurophysiological factors as well, involving the higher rate at which autistic people experience abnormal phenomenologies (see Ribolsi et al. [2022] for review). One thing to note is that autistic people may simply be disproportionately prone to experiences of *thought insertion*. To have an experience of thought insertion, with respect to a particular thought, is to lack what is called in the literature on the phenomenology of the self, a *sense of ownership* for that thought. (The liberature distinguishes the sense of ownership for a thought from the sense of agency for a thought; see e.g., Martin and Pacherie [2013].) The literature on the phenomenology of ownership (and on the phenomenology of agency) make clear that such experiences are the products of *inferences* (albeit often only at a subpersonal level) made by a mindreading system. And one of the ways autism manifests is as differences in mindreading ability or performance.[12]

11. It's worth noting that in the autistic systems I encountered, headmates believed that every headmate in their system was autistic. They viewed autism a something like a fundamental processing style that a brain either does or doesn't have, and thus as something all systemmates will necessarily share.

12. Some autistic people believe that what the literature calls "social difficulties" or "theory of mind deficits" in autistics should properly be called something like "social difficulties with allistics" or "theory of allistic

Typically, theory of mind differences in autism are discussed as deficits in mindreading others. But many researchers have claimed that people with autism are impaired at mindreading themselves, too. (Though, to be fair, much of the literature investigating deficits in psychological self-knowledge concerns something closer to an over-propensity to attribute intentions and beliefs to oneself, rather than an under-propensity to recognize one's mental states as one's own; see, e.g., Williams [2010] for review.) If such deficits are real, it is plausible that they could contribute to an increased tendency to lose the sense of ownership and the sense of agency. Arnaud (2020) meanwhile argues that self-consciousness simply operates differently, in a rather global sense, in autistic versus in allistic (non-autistic) people, with autistic people having (among other things) a greater tendency towards *third-personal* routes to self-knowledge (e.g., via observing their own behavior) and greater difficulties shifting between first- and third-person perspectives on themselves.

Returning to social and cognitive factors, several autistic plurals I spoke to in one way or another referred to how autistic people relate to social constructs. Allistic people, they said, tend to learn social constructs so effortlessly and intuitively, and often at so young an age, that they may have trouble even recognizing them *as* social constructs. In contrast, they said, for autistic people, learning about constructs like gender takes effortful and explicit thought—and once explicit thought is introduced into the process, there is the possibility of challenging the construct itself. And the *unitary person* is *also* a social construct: as one headmate said, "When the thing that you're doing explicitly is constructing an identity, that gives you a lot more opportunities to do weird things with it like construct two identities in parallel as opposed to just something that your brain does automatically, that you don't think about."[13]

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mind deficits": allistics (i.e., non-autistics) have just as much difficulty understanding autistics, they say, as autistics have understanding allistics; autistic mindreading looks like a *deficit* only because allistic minds are so much more numerous. (This perspective would however be challenged were it in fact the case that autistic people are also less accurate at judging their own mental states.) Really, the only claim that would be needed to suggest a basis for an increased tendency towards experiences of disownership is the modest one that autistic people tend to apply theory of mind concepts somewhat differently than do allistic (non-autistic) people. There are cognitive psychological accounts of autism that make much stronger claims, such as that the core deficit in autism (such accounts simply assume a deficit picture of autism) is a theory of mind deficit. But the core feature of autism could operate at a much lower level—for instance, some sort of basic difference in perceptual processing—and still have downstream effects on the acquisition and/or exercise of mindreading abilities.

13. A couple of autistic plurals I spoke to also commented that autistic people are less motivated to try to be *normal* with respect to their identities and self-presentation and suggested that as a result, autistic people are also less averse to giving atypical answers to identity questions once they are explicitly raised. I do not know whether that empirical claim about the drive for normalcy is correct, though one paper (Chevallier et al. 2012) argues that while the strength of primary attachments (to parents, children) and the drive for sexual and romantic partnerships are basically normal in autistic people, desire for *social affiliation* is significantly reduced. The desire for social affiliation is itself multifaceted, but one aspect of it is impression management: acting so as to appear likable, attractive, competent, and so on; the authors cite a number

It should also be noted that autistic people often struggle with feelings of social isolation and loneliness (Schiltz et al. 2021), and such feelings may motivate creating headmates. Most of the plurals I spoke to said that conversations and relations between headmates are so similar to ordinary interpersonal conversations and relationships that it is difficult to feel *lonely* as a member of a system. And in fact, one frequently mentioned reason for pursuing tulpamancy is something like loneliness (Shinyuu 2015) and the perceived desirability of sharing one's day-to-day life and innermost thoughts with another being or person specifically created for affinity with oneself, for the rest of one's life.

There is in fact a kind of "hyper-individualism" that's interesting about the phenomenon of tulpamancy, where the society-wide problem of increasing social isolation and alienation is dealt with not by *reaching out* to the community of other human beings but rather by creating community within oneself. And it is possible that this sort of solution is more tempting to autistic people, in part because the challenge of connecting with (majority allistic) human beings—great as it is for the allistic population, at this point—can be even greater for them.

5 The Basis of the Plural Identity Claim

This section concerns the basis of plural identity and some challenges to making sense of the plural identity claim.

Identities are a subset of one's beliefs about oneself: those that provide a sense of meaning, purpose, or affiliation, and that offer constraints on action. Self-beliefs that are not part of my identity do not provide constraints on action in the same way; for instance, I believe that I am a Honda driver (both of our cars are Hondas), but only if this were a part of my *identity* would my being a Honda driver count for me as a reason not to buy a Toyota.

Someone's identity, so defined, is a subjective psychological feature; it is not, then, the objective notion of identity in which metaphysicians are interested, which I will call *metaphysical identity*. If animalism offered the correct metaphysical account of the identity of persons, then I would be an animal regardless of whether or not I identified as (or even believed that I was) an animal. After all, animalists believe that those who identify as immortal souls are also animals.

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of papers suggesting that autistic individuals do far less of this. Of course, one might think that this is not due to lesser motivation to be accepted by others but lesser knowledge of *how* to be accepted by others. But the authors argue for a specifically motivational factor, drawing in part on neurophysiological research. It should be noted that the nature of social desires in autistic people is subtle and controversial (Jaswal and Akhtar 2019).

Crucially, good answers to questions of metaphysical identity can be bad answers to questions of *psychological identity*, and vice versa, since the criteria for goodness are so different. (Presumably answers to metaphysical identity questions are good if they're true; truth is at least not sufficient for goodness in the case of answers to psychological identity questions, and it might be doubted that truth is even necessary.) Many philosophers who endorse animalism probably don't find the proposition that they are animals to be great sources of meaning or purpose, for instance.

Most psychological identities are neutral on issues of metaphysical identity. Someone who identifies strongly as an academic isn't committing themselves to an implausible metaphysics of persons; they think that it is *they themselves* who (for example) "wouldn't know who they were" if they didn't have an academic position.

Sometimes, however, people's psychological identities do make metaphysical commitments. I have a New Age friend for whom it is absolutely central to her identity, including her life's work, that she is a reincarnated soul. It wouldn't surprise me if there were vegans who identified as animals in a way that mere animalists (typically) do not. A part of a plural's (or a headmate's) psychological identity, too, seems to be a proposition about her metaphysical identity conditions. If this is the right way of interpreting the plural identity claim—as a metaphysical claim—then it is naturally inconsistent with animalism.

The animalist Eric Olson once argued that if the diencephalic conjoined twins Brittany and Abigail Hensel are parts of one animal (as there is at least some reason to think), then they are in fact parts of one person (Olson 2014). In that case, he said, if one of their heads and brains—say, Brittany's—were destroyed, no *person* would have thereby ceased to exist, so long as the other brain (Abigail's) continued to function. Of course, the Hensel twins' parents would mourn *as though* they had lost a daughter, and it would be inappropriate to attempt to console them by saying, "I'm so sorry for what your daughter has lost, but at least no one died." Nonetheless, this interpersonally inept remark would be *metaphysically* correct, on Olson's account. Such implications have led me to believe that even if animalists are somehow correct about the metaphysics of the thing, they're not talking about what many of us mean when we talk about persons.[14]

For this reason, I believe that some version of psychologism offers the best account of the concept of personal identity that I am interested in. But animalism merely forbids plural personhood; psychologism does not show that it is nomologically possible, much less that it is actual in the case of plurals. And in fact, even if singlets all agreed that it is

14. Olson might respond that my confidence that Brittany and Abigail are in fact distinct person is explained by my believing that they are distinct animals. But in fact my own reasonably confident view is that it is metaphysically indeterminate how many animals Brittany and Abigail are, since they are biologically quite intermediate between being one human animal and two. It is not metaphysically indeterminate how many persons they are, though; they are two persons—using what I think is the ordinary (but also ethically primary) notion of a person.

theoretically possible for a human being to be multiple persons, there is something puzzling about *plurals'* own claims to multiple personhood. This is because plurals reject—as a description of multiplicity—the stereotypic picture of multiplicity inspired by DID. But it is this stereotypic picture that suggests criteria of individuation for persons that has up until now allowed singlets to make sense of the idea of multiple persons in one body.

5.1 What Individuation Criteria?

The stereotypic picture of multiplicity has two main elements, each of which bears some resemblance to one of the first two diagnostic criteria for DID, though in exaggerated form. The first element of the stereotypic picture is that distinct headmates have starkly different personalities, values, manners of social interaction, and so forth (see, for instance, Tye [2003])—and, indeed, that these stark differences between headmates are overtly manifest in behavior. Each of these distinct headmates is—according to the stereotypic picture—unusually one-dimensional in its personality and predispositions, with each headmate representing a different dimension; for instance, one headmate might be the "angry one" and another the "bubbly one." One might doubt (and many philosophers have doubted) that such one-dimensional types could truly be persons, rather than mere aspects of a single rich three-dimensional person. But at least this feature of the stereotypic picture suggests a clear criterion of individuation that might be used to argue for the multiple persons conclusion.

The second element of the stereotypic picture of multiplicity is that each headmate is a distinct island of consciousness and memory in a sea of amnesia: different headmates have different memories and personal knowledge, each being wholly unaware of the other's experiences and actions, except perhaps very indirectly (e.g., finding evidence on one's credit card statement of a purchase made by another headmate). This feature suggests a neo-Lockean criterion of individuation that might be used to argue for the multiple persons claim: one looks for continuity in (especially episodic) long-term memory—itself suggesting continuity of first-person conscious experience—casting discontinuities as the boundaries between different persons or selves.

The problem is that plurals often claim that the stereotypic picture is a picture of *dissociative identity disorder*, specifically, and an exaggerated one even then: plurals without DID and even plurals with DID often deny that it characterizes their own multiplicity. They deny, for instance, that their headmates are always of neat and distinctly defined personality, emotional, or behavioral types:

> One of the beliefs perpetuated by early therapists and MPD/DID literature was that, since all selves were assumed to be a "part" of an original person, each of them was only capable of a single function or emotion—the angry one, the scared one, the seductive one, etc. There are people who *do* mistake having different aspects of their self for having separate selves, or name their moods and decide them to be different personalities. However, we're certain we're not doing anything like that. Why? Well, all of us have full ranges of emotion, and don't identify in particular with one emotion—we're all capable of being happy, upset, scared, angry, etc. We don't switch every time we start feeling a particular emotion. (Amorpha Household, n.d.)

Again, even multiples with DID may deny that their headmates are radically psychologically different from each other:

> Nothing with DID is ever black and white and just like you and I might have things in common, there are plenty of things I have in common with everyone I share my brain with. (Callum 2019)

It is not just plurals and multiples themselves who reject this aspect of the stereotypic picture of multiplicity; DID clinicians and researchers have noted that different headmates (clinically, "alters") may have much in common, as Kluft (one of the best known DID clinicians) does when he notes that "Alters may pass for the host or be copies of the host" (2006, 297); indeed, Kluft goes so far as to claim that possessing "alters" (his term) that are "quite similar" or even "isomorphic" is the "true paradigmatic expression" of dissociative identity disorder (1991, 611). Clinicians and researchers thus now often emphasize that dissociative identity disorder is at base a *phenomenological* condition (see e.g, Gleaves [1996, 44], as well as Dell [2006b]).

Plurals (with and certainly without DID) may also deny that their headmates are mutually amnesic, in either of two senses. First, two headmates may be mutually co-conscious, both experiencing everything at the same time. Thus while two headmates may report having had different (token) experiences of each other's actions, they also both report having experienced and now remembering all the same actions. (It's worth noting that some research into amnesia in DID has suggested that it is a deficit in "meta-memory" (Huntjens et al. 2006, 862)—that is, *knowledge* of memory—rather than in memory itself (see e.g., Marsh et al. [2021]; Kindt and Van Den Hout [2003].) Second, even if two headmates are never co-conscious with each other, they may share knowledge of each other's experiences and actions by "communicating" with each other after the fact. (Many plurals report that their different headmates can "talk to" each other, in inner speech; others speak out loud to each other or write notes; other headmates seem simply to *know,*

propositionally, what the others have experienced.) Indeed, even traumagenic plurals may not meet Criterion B strictly stated:

> It is possible for multiple groups to have continuity of consciousness between persons – a memory as good as anyone else's. In a responsible, healthy system, if something important happens, people [i.e., headmates] will be told one way or another, even in systems with little or no co-consciousness. If we need to remember something, we will ask other people [i.e., other headmates] about it and obtain that information. (The Blackbirds, n.d.)

So, plurals reject the stereotypic picture of multiplicity for mischaracterizing the nature of the relationships between headmates. This rejection is, again, echoed by some contemporary clinicians and researchers working with DID patients. But this rejection makes it difficult to understand the meaning of the plural identity claim or the confidence in which it's held.

Using the stereotypic picture, it is at least clear what the criteria for individuating persons in a DID subject would be, even if we don't think those criteria are very good: either a sort of criterion of radical psychological difference, or an amnesia criterion, or both. Note that these are, effectively, third-personal criteria: extensive psychiatric test or observation could reveal whether or not they were met. But the multiplicity that plurals describe might well be basically *invisible* to second and third parties. This is not because there are *no* psychobehavioral differences between different headmates. It's because if we don't have any non-subjective grounds for positing them in the first place—no grounds, that is, other than first-person report—then there is no great obstacle to seeing multiple "headmates" merely as multiple features of *one* psychological being that make that being rich or nuanced or—at worst—simply confusing in some way.

In one sense, this isn't a surprising result, if multiplicity is in fact first and foremost a phenomenological condition, as Dell (2006b) argues. Still, most singlets don't have the phenomenology of multiplicity, and this presents a serious obstacle to their (our) understanding a plural's claim that there are multiple people sharing their brain. What criteria of individuation are *plurals* using? Not a spatial or bodily criterion, obviously, and not a (straightforward) criterion of psychological *difference*, either.

One possibility is that plurals mean to individuate persons on the basis of their consciousnesses. Unfortunately, there are longstanding puzzles about how to individuate streams or centers of consciousness (Famously, for instance, people are able to conceive of the continuity of either their neural or their other psychological properties *without* the continuity of their very stream of consciousness—of their own conscious subject, as opposed to a subject merely psychologically identical to it.) Worse yet, plurals don't

even seem to consistently mean to individuate headmates in terms of their streams of consciousness. For in many cases, they say, the brain gives rise to a single stream of consciousness—at least in the sense that there is never more than one such stream at any moment. Yet this consciousness is *colored,* at a given time, by the identity of the person whose consciousness it "is" at that time: so first, the world is experienced as Sarah experiences it, and then the world is experienced as Miguel experiences it—but (they report) it is less like each of them has their own stream of consciousness and more like first Sarah is subject to that stream and then Miguel to that same stream.

Plurals seem to use discontinuities in their *sense* of self and agency—discontinuities for which I don't think there is, currently, any adequate explanation—to draw the boundaries between different consciousnesses.[15] But this is still problematic. A plural claims that *each* headmate within their body feels to themselves like *his or her or their own self,* and not like the selves of the others. It would be exceedingly difficult even to express this claim without helping myself to a term like "headmate" and to a grammar that suggests that there really *are* multiple beings each enjoying a first-personal phenomenology. (Try to express it otherwise. "The plural claims that he feels like himself sometimes but not at other times" mischaracterizes the plural's claim: at every moment, they may say, each headmate feels like themselves, so there is, at any point in time, always *someone* who *does* feel like themselves. "The plural claims that he feels like multiple persons or like different people at different times" also mischaracterizes the plural's claim: the speaking headmate may say, "No—I always feel like one person, and always the same person!") But how does headmate H1 *know* that headmate H2 feels like himself—like H2—at every moment? Suppose that at a given moment, a two-headmate system is, say, cooking dinner, and headmate H1 does not feel as though it were *H1* doing it. So, headmate H1 assumes, headmate H2 must feel as though it were him (H2) doing it. Apparently H1 does not experience this very feeling—so H1 has no first-person, introspective knowledge of it. (Radden [1998], has an interesting paper on puzzles posed by simultaneous awareness of multiple consciousnesses.) The most H1 can know from her *own* experience is that certain thoughts, actions, etc., *don't* feel, to her, like *hers.* How does she know that they *do* simultaneously feel to H2's like *his?* Well, H2 could *tell* H1 that they do. But for H1 to take this "on H2's authority," H1 must *already* think H2 exists; otherwise, "H2's saying,"

15. I also don't know of an account of this phenomenology that is adequate to explain the sort of phenomenology that plurals describe. As Pickard (2010) points out, it's unclear that Frith's (1992) motoric account of experiences of disownership works for *thoughts* as well as it does for *actions.* Frith's account is otherwise appealing since it does not turn on the *kind* of thing someone is thinking, feeling, or doing. Pickard's account of disownership experiences is not "content-neutral" in the same way: rather, what explains someone's sense that they weren't the agent of a thought is its radical inconsistency with what she takes to be her own values, beliefs, etc. While this may be right for people with schizophrenia (the targets of both Frith's and Pickard's models), it doesn't apply to all plurals, who may say that their headmates have a lot in common, often think alike, and so on.

in inner speech, "My consciousness always feels like my own," is just another dissociated thought *of H1* occurring in her mind.

Note that this is basically just the problem of other minds. Plurals might point out that no one actually worries whether other human beings have minds, so why should one headmate worry about whether other headmates have minds? A skeptical singlet might respond that at least other human beings have perceptibly distinct bodies. But perhaps a plural would respond by asking why that should matter.

I tried to express this confusion to a few of the plurals I spoke to and the clearest answer I got was something like a "golden rule" principle: the headmate in question said, basically, that while it was true that he couldn't experience his other headmates' perspectives and thus couldn't *know* that they had perspectives in the same confident way that he knew he had his own, he would hate if his headmates started doubting that *he* had a perspective, and so wanted to extend to them the same trust he demanded from them. But once again this argument seems already to simply take as given the existence of other headmates (in this case headmates who could deny one's own sentience).

There are thus stark limits to my own understanding of the plural identity claim and accordingly to what I can make clear about that identity here. The best I can do is to try to make a little more intuitive the kind of *basis* upon which a plural comes to conclude that there is some psychological being other than the person she takes herself to be, sharing her body or mind. I will attempt this in Section 6.

The final judgment anyone should make about the truth or falsity of the plural self-belief is not pursued here. On the one hand, as I've noted in this section, there are certain difficulties in understanding the belief. Moreover, and unsurprisingly, accepting (some version of) the claim would raise a multitude of more and less obvious ethical, social, and legal difficulties. In the next two subsections, however, I explain why I think the matter does at least deserve exploration, rather than being able to be immediately dismissed.

5.2 The Metaphor Objection

The first immediate objection to engaging in any serious investigation of the truth of the plural identity claim is an objection to interpreting the plural identity claim *literally*. The objection is that people can be mistaken about the meaning of their identity claims, and that plurals might mean—perhaps, if they are rational, must mean—the plural identity claim only metaphorically, without realizing it.

The plurals I spoke to were willing to concede that the claim could be called metaphorical in one obvious sense: multiple persons within a system do not have their own bodies. As one headmate put it to me, "the *most* literal meaning of two different people would be

two completely separate people who are housed separately basically"—that is, who are not co-embodied. Granting that, however, that headmate insisted that their own plural identity claim was "about as literal as it can be with us still being in the same body."

Moreover, plurals insist that the plural identity claim is not just a metaphorical way of talking about what it is like to be a *singlet*. That is, they explicitly distinguish the claim from familiar metaphors used to talk about ambivalence, complexity, interpersonal influence, or change (e.g., *I'm of two minds about this; I'm a completely different person at work; what I said before—that was my father speaking; I don't identify with who I was then*):

> The [popular and mistaken] reasoning goes that we all have different sides to ourselves, and some people build a delusion around this natural state and come to believe that the different sides of themselves are different identities, including assigning names to these states. It's completely true that people express different sides of themselves according to different contexts. However, this is different from multiplicity. Members of a multiple group will individually experience themselves as having these "different sides," just like everyone else. (One Fox Faraday 2015, original emphasis)

One might press the metaphor interpretation by pointing to *otherkin:* people (headmates and singlets) who identify as non-human animals or fantastical creatures. Needless to say, there is something *obviously* self-contradictory in such identity claims; I take it that foxes, for instance, do not identify as foxes; certainly a fox cannot *say,* "I am a fox." Even in identifying as a fox, then, an otherkin seems to contradict that very identity claim—and this must be obvious even to them, which surely provides reason to interpret the claim nonliterally. (Philosopher Katrina Haaksma has investigated the phenomenon of otherkin and suggested to me that the major meaning of the otherkin identity claim is simply that one identifies as a member of a particular human social group—the group of otherkin—with the specific creature identified with being less significant than is membership in this community, and perhaps selected on the basis of admiration or affection. Haaksma also suggested that otherkin might not *know* that this is the true meaning of their otherkin identity claims.)[16]

16. One question the phenomenon of otherkin poses is what it means to respect identities or other core beliefs with which one does not agree. This sort of question has a substantial philosophical aspect—involving both ethics and epistemology—especially in cases in which one thinks the beliefs may be mistaken. When they are very unusual, and especially if they bear any association to some psychopathology, the question takes on a clinical aspect. Unsurprisingly, the issue of respecting beliefs with which one does not agree is much discussed in psychiatry (e.g., Koenig [2008], on the mismatch between psychiatrists' and patients' *religious* beliefs) and in medicine more broadly (often under the umbrella of respecting cultural differences). This issue is also one that has been written about in the specific case of plural identities (see e.g., Rivera [1997:

There is overlap between otherkin and plural populations, but even if there weren't, one might take the mere fact of otherkin to provide reason against taking the plural identity claim seriously. The reasoning might be something like this: even if there were reason to *prima facie* trust or "respect" people's sincerely meant identity claims, otherkin show that some such claims are somehow metaphorical (or else obviously false). So why not take *this* strange identity claim to be one of the metaphorical (or else false) ones?[17]

The non-otherkin plurals I spoke to suggested that the otherkin identity claim was meant in some metaphorical or "spiritual" sense and explicitly distinguished it, in this way, from the plural identity claim. Some of the otherkin headmates I spoke to agreed, though one otherkin plural I raised the issue with insisted that it was literally true that one of their headmates was a fox, albeit, they acknowledged, a fox that lacked a fox's body or brain. (This exchange supported the suggestion that people may be confused about the literal meaning of the term "literal.")

It is not prima facie unreasonable to distinguish the plural identity claim from the otherkin identity claim; certainly it is possible to make two surprising claims and to mean one of them literally and the other non-literally, or for one of them to be true and the other false. But it is nonetheless the case—and the non-otherkin plurals I spoke to recognized and regretted this—that the existence of human beings who say not just "I am a headmate" but also "I am a fox" or "I am a dragon," makes it more difficult to take the plural identity claim seriously. If nothing else, otherkin identity claims create precedent for *not* accepting as literally true some identity claims that nonetheless seem to be both meaningful to and sincerely meant by those making them.

At the same time, the plural identity claim is unlike the otherkin identity claim in one crucial sense: the *literal* meaning of the claim that X is a fox is clear, forcing a metaphorical reading of a human being's claim that they are a fox. The literal meaning of the claim that X is a *person* is, however, contestable: philosophers still debate just who meets the criteria

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33]), which some clinicians worry are not only false but also harmful or limiting in some way. Simultaneously, the voices of plurals arguing that plural identities are *not* harmful and *not* limiting—that these identities are just the *truth* of who they are—must also be listened to.

17. I also met a number of headmates who described themselves as "fictives", identifying with characters in works of fiction. This turned out to be less metaphysically interesting than I had originally thought. The fictives I spoke to said that their *being,* say, Huck Finns, meant, first, that their character and personality was based on that of Huck Finn as described in the book *Huckleberry Finn* (Twain 1884) and also that their own "life narratives" included his (or most of his) past as described in that book. Again the latter seemed more metaphysically interesting than it turned out to be, because they mostly just said that having Huck Finn's past as part of their life narrative obviously did not mean that their *body* was actually in Missouri in the first half of the 19th Century, but rather meant something more like that features of their personality and emotional life, now, were best explained *by reference to* the life story of the fictional character with whom they identified. And this itself is arguably not mysterious: identifying as someone who wasn't loved as a child, for instance, can be expected to have an effect on someone's personality, even if they *were* loved as a child. In any event, the points I am trying to make on behalf of the metaphorical objection can be made more clearly using otherkin.

for personhood and what those criteria are. And there are accounts of persons or selves according to which they are ideal, abstract, or purely intentional objects, which makes the distinction between literal and metaphorical uses of the term "person" inherently unclear.

Again, if part of what is it for it to be *literally* true that X and Y are distinct people is that X and Y are not co-embodied, then of course the plural identity claim is metaphorical. But then the question just becomes what it is a metaphor *for*, and it could turn out that, for instance, ethical questions about how to relate to systems turn more on the metaphorical meaning than on the literal one.

5.3 The Delusion Objection

The next objection to taking the plural identity claim seriously is difficult to express in a respectful manner, so I will just state it frankly. The objection is that the plural identity claim is just obviously crazy—delusional, let us say. Note that this is distinct from the objection that the plural identity claim is *false* (a claim the paper neither defends nor rejects).

One way of developing the objection might be to focus on the phenomenological abnormalities that help motivate and ground plural identity. One might simply call these hallucinations and hallmarks of psychosis; one of the articles cited earlier (Ribolsi et al. 2022), for instance, uses the language of hallucination and psychosis in speaking of the abnormal experiences and beliefs that occur with higher prevalence in people with autism. Beliefs formed on the basis of hallucination are unjustified; therefore, the plural identity claim itself is clearly unjustified.

Again this paper does not seek to engage with the truth or falsity of the plural identity claim. Indeed, given the limited ambitions of this paper, I cannot engage fully even with the delusion objection. But let me make just this one point: the basic problem with its reasoning is that the abnormal experiences that a plural takes to justify their plural identity might also be taken to ground the *truth* of that identity.

Hearing, inside one's mind, what one takes to be the voice of the King of France does not justify beliefs about the King of France nor, of course, make it the case that France has a king. But it could be *argued* that hearing, inside one's mind, the voice of a headmate justifies beliefs about that headmate and even makes it the case that there is such a headmate. Compare: hearing *my* voice in inner speech justifies some beliefs about myself and may also (help) make it the case that such a self exists in the first place. Of course, it might be questioned whether hearing my voice in inner speech justifies believing that I exist; after all, it might be said, that's a question-begging way of describing things; really I hear *a* voice in inner speech; does that justify believing that *I,* the *speaker,* exist?

Similarly, it might be questioned whether my inner speech does contribute to the *fact* of my existence; maybe even without the capacity of speech, I would have a self. But now we are getting into familiar territory about the nature of the self and its relationship to first-person narration (see e.g., Dennett, 1992, 1989). To the extent that the truth of the plural identity claim hinges on controversies in this familiar territory, it can't be dismissed as *delusional*.

It is instructive to compare the abnormal experiences of plurals with descriptions of thought insertion in schizophrenia. In discussions of thought insertion in schizophrenia, individuals with schizophrenia are described not only as judging that certain thoughts they're aware of are not their own but also as attributing them to other human beings (or other non-co-embodied agents, e.g., God). Here are two commonly cited examples of judgments of thought insertion in schizophrenia:

> I look out the window and I think that the garden looks nice and the grass looks cool, but the thoughts of Eamonn Andrews come into my mind. There are no other thoughts there, only his. … He treats my mind like a screen and flashes his thoughts into it like you flash a picture. (Mellor 1970, 17)

> Thoughts are put into my mind like "Kill God". It is just like my mind working, but it isn't. They come from this chap, Chris. They are his thoughts. (Frith 1992, 66)

Needless to say, we do not bother to consider whether these claims could be correct. One doesn't need to know anything about Eammon Andrews or Chris (assuming both even exist) to know that they cannot put their thoughts into other people's brains somehow.

But the implausibility of plurals' claims about having other people's thoughts in their minds is more difficult to judge. There is no posited *cross-brain* thought projection being posited by a plural; the posited other person's brain just *is* their brain, and so there is no mystery about why they can experience each other's thoughts. Of course, one's immediate impulse might still be to think that it's crazy to suppose that such another person could be there, inside their same brain yet with their own thoughts. But why? The plural says something like: after all, you don't think it's crazy to suppose that *I* am here, in my brain, with my own thoughts. And if you (understandably) retreat quickly to animalism—"But you are just a human animal, singular, with one brain"—then they can say something like: but you don't deny that my brain can produce a personality, an autobiography, a center of consciousness and self-consciousness, a collection of thought patterns, preferences, and so on—and indeed, don't you admit that if I had none of these things, you wouldn't even consider me to be a person at all? So how do you know that my brain can't produce two or three or ten of these things?

Of course, it could well be that the brain *can't* do this. (Although the existence of authors who construct a number of different and richly sketched characters suggest that at least *some* brains can.) But this, in any event, is an empirical question, rather than something that can be dismissed out of hand as impossible. Or it may be that no matter how many autobiographical narratives and so on a brain produces, these must all belong to one person. But to say so is just to insist upon a class of account of the metaphysics of persons that is, notably, also rejected by some philosophers.

Indeed, the existence of philosophical accounts of personhood that allow for the possibility of multiple persons in one body recommends a certain humility in evaluating *plurals'* claims about their personhood. Dennett for instance once wrote that the idea of multiple persons or selves in one body:

> strikes many people as too outlandish and metaphysically bizarre to believe—a "paranormal" phenomenon to discard along with ESP, close encounters of the third kind and witches on broomsticks. I suspect that some of these people have made a simple arithmetical mistake: they have failed to notice that two or three or seventeen selves per body is really no more metaphysically extravagant than one self per body. One is bad enough! (Dennett 1989, 169)

In holding beliefs inconsistent with metaphysical accounts of persons that exclude the possibility of multiple personhood, both plurals and Dennett may of course be *wrong*. But surely no belief can qualify as *delusional* simply in virtue of its inconsistency with a metaphysics of persons that is controversial even amongst singlet philosophers.

6 The Origins of Plural Identity

No one is born identifying as either a singlet or a plural, but in the present cultural context, coming to identify as the sole person present in one's body is—to put it mildly—the strong default. How is it that some human beings come to identify as systems?

It seems to occur in two stages, although these likely overlap temporally in many or most cases. In the *experiential stage,* an individual has experiences *as of* there being other psychological beings inside their body or brain, whether or not they conceptualize these experiences as experiences of distinct psychological "others", much less of distinct full persons. In the *conceptual stage,* an individual comes to believe that it is possible and even fruitful to conceptualize experiences of multiplicity in terms of the existence of multiple persons sharing one brain and applies (or becomes disposed to apply) this conceptualization to their own experiences.

The order in which these two stages initiate is switched between tulpagenic and other systems. Tulpagenic plurals pass through the conceptual stage first: they read accounts from other tulpamancers, they wonder whether one truly *can* create other sentient and intelligent being inside oneself, and they find and follow instructions as to how to *generate* and *recognize* experiences of multiplicity, via the practices of tulpamancy. Often things go no further than this, since it is possible to fail to generate persuasive or systematic experiences of multiplicity. But even if one succeeds in generating such experiences, the conceptual stage may not be over. First, it's always possible to adopt deflationary interpretations of such experiences; second, even if the tulpamancer comes to view themselves as having been in some sense successful, there are successful tulpamancers who don't view their tulpas as on par with they themselves, as actual persons. Other tulpamancers however find persuasive psychological, social, and ethical accounts of tulpamancy that do urge recognition of tulpa personhood. And once the tulpamancer begins reaching the experiential stage, the two stages begin to interact: the tulpamancer attempts to apply a new conceptual framework to their experiences, and that application changes their experiences in ways consistent with that framework, thereby providing confirmation of that framework, spurring the tulpamancer on to greater engagement with tulpamancy practices, producing stronger and more compelling experiences of multiplicity.

This two-stage process and tulpamancy practices themselves are strikingly similar to the processes and practices by which many evangelical Christians in the United States come to "hear God," as documented in Lurhmann's (2012) book, *When God Talks Back: Understanding the American Evangelical Relationship with God*. One tulpamancer I spoke with remarked that "the parallels were not lost" on them, and suggested that indeed, one plausible interpretation of an evangelical who deliberately practices talking to Jesus, imagining being in Jesus' presence, attentively listening for "Jesus's voice," learning to distinguish this voice from their own thoughts, and so on, is that what they are doing is creating a *Jesus tulpa*. This Jesus tulpa might indeed be real sentient being, a real person, this headmate told me, but of course is not (unlike the actual Jesus) a real Second Temple period Jew; rather, he would simply be a person *modeled after* Jesus, with some of his characteristics (or at least with some of the characteristics that evangelical believed Jesus had).

In traumagenic (and, more broadly, non-intentionally created) systems, in contrast, experiences of multiplicity come spontaneously and first. Many non-tulpagenic plurals describe years of either not realizing how unusual were their experiences of, say, inner voices, or years of realizing that they were unusual but just understanding those experiences to be the product of, say, unusual creativity. (One "original" headmate told me that for years they thought their headmates were just fictional characters that their "brain" was coming up with, and indeed, they wrote many long works of fiction about these charac-

ters; only much later did they realize, they said, that they weren't characters but *people*.) At some point they discover—perhaps in therapy, but frequently online—the suggestion that some human brains are "home" to multiple people instead of just one. The non-tulpagenic plurals I spoke to mostly said that once they found the conceptual framework of plural personhood, things "snapped into place," without an extended period of back-and-forth between and mutual application of experience and conceptualization, but this is not universal; in fact, even within a single system, plural concepts and identity can make more sense to some headmates than to others.

The process by which a plural first comes to accept the plural identity claim, then, differs between subpopulations. But it might still seem incredible that anyone should accept such a claim. I am therefore going to describe three hypothetical scenarios that will hopefully give readers some understanding of the route by which someone might indeed come to seriously consider the plural identity claim for themselves.

The first scenario is simple. Suppose you found yourself inside a large, locked building. At a certain point, you started hearing a voice—not yours. Or you kept finding notes—not written by you. You would infer that there must be another person in the building with you. Naturally, you would assume that they were embodied, that they had their *own* body (not yours).

In the second scenario, you are still in a locked building, but this time, you begin to hear this other voice *speaking out of your mouth*.

You might be thinking that you would, in that case, reject the hypothesis that it wasn't in fact your own voice you were hearing. I assume that I would, too. But there are limits to this. Suppose that I were in the building as a subject in a neuroprosthetics experiment. Maybe one that I suspected wasn't entirely legal. Maybe that makes it more likely that someone else was using some sort of device, experimentally implanted in my brain, to speak out of my mouth, as it were.

Now this is still extraordinarily unlikely; it's the sort of conclusion that, if I accepted it too readily, would qualify me as delusional. But note that that's in part because the unlikely conclusion, in this case, is that some other *human being*—with their own body and brain—was speaking from my mouth. I cannot say just how unlikely I think that possibility is (much depends upon whether the technology that would allow it actually existed), but certainly it is exceedingly unlikely.

What plurals believe is different, though, and I find it harder to assign it a prior probability to it at all. How likely is it that some other person, *who stands in just the same relation to my brain and body that I do,* is speaking out of my mouth? That is, that there isn't some other human being, with his own vocal apparatus, who is using mine to speak —but rather someone else who has the very same claim to my apparatus that I do?

My immediate impulse is to say that it could not be true—but if you asked me why I believe that I'm the "only one home" in my brain, I would immediately appeal to evidence: if there were someone else in my brain, wouldn't they have been doing lots of things, with my body, that haven't been done? Wouldn't they be saying things—with my mouth—that surprised me and felt foreign to me? But the sort of evidence that I think I *lack* for there being another person sharing my brain is exactly the sort of evidence that plurals think they *possess*.

Now consider a third hypothetical scenario. Recently, you have been having experiences as of hearing someone else's words come out of your mouth, or as of feeling someone else act through your body, and these are causing you a lot of anxiety. In fact, you've scheduled an appointment with a psychiatrist, though you're freaked out enough to contemplate canceling. Trying to work through your anxieties the night before your appointment, you take out your journal and write, "I keep hearing words come out of my mouth that don't feel like mine. I mean it's really literally like hearing someone else speaking, except out of my own throat. I'm scared and I don't know what's happening. Am I going crazy?" The next day you bravely keep your appointment. But as you walk through the office doorway, you suddenly feel as though you are just floating within your body, rather than fully inhabiting it. You can feel your body walk to the couch and sit down, but you don't feel as though *you're* the one walking or sitting—you feel as though you're just *in* your body, with someone else moving it—sort of like a marionette, except with the strings on the inside. You hear this other voice you've been hearing—the one that doesn't feel like yours, but which issues from your mouth—introduce yourself using the childhood nickname ("Wendy") that you haven't used for years (you go by Olivia). And you hear yourself *provide an example of the concerns for which you are seeking therapy* by saying, "Last night for example, I saw myself writing this journal entry—but I swear, it was like watching someone else write it with my hand." And then as you find yourself looking down at the page in question, you hear the unfamiliar voice issuing from your mouth as it reads the entry: "Here it is. 'I keep hearing words come out of my mouth that don't feel like mine. I mean it's really literally like someone else speaking, except out of my own throat. I'm scared and I don't know what's happening. Am I going crazy?'" Then the voice from your mouth says, "I remember seeing myself write this, but it was like it was my hand writing it instead of me. And I *was* feeling afraid, except it was like it was someone else's fear. Even the handwriting doesn't look like mine. Mine is different."

You are surprised to hear yourself saying these things, which are so untrue: you remember clearly that at the moment when you were writing in your journal— *unlike* at this moment—you *didn't* feel alienated from your actions. You felt fully connected to what you were doing. And, by the way—the handwriting most certainly *is* yours!

Imagine having a number of experiences like this, until, one day, it occurs to you to wonder: in the same way that *you* think that this is *your* body, and are struggling to understand all of the words issuing from this mouth as *yours* and *yours alone*—could there also be another person, who thinks your body is *her* body, and who is trying to understand all the words issuing from your mouth as *hers* and *hers* alone?

You might have no particular view of how this is possible. You don't know how there could be someone else sharing your brain. But then—not being a neuroscientist or a philosopher—it's not as though you have a worked-out view of how *you* are "in" your brain, either.

The thought may first occur to you only as a fleeting fancy—not even a hypothesis—long before you *believe* it. But perhaps one day—feeling a bit silly—you take out a piece of paper, and write in big letters, "Wendy, are you there?" And then it seems to you that you are merely watching someone write with your hand but in foreign handwriting, "Who are you?!" And you—scarcely believing it—respond, "I'm Olivia," though it might take a number of back-and-forths before you stop feeling self-conscious, before it becomes totally natural for you to think of yourself as writing to another person. Or maybe you don't even bother to write, "Wendy, are you there?" Maybe you just *ask* it in inner speech—and then you hear—also in inner speech—"Who are you?!" Not only does it feel to you as though you were not the agent of this question, but its content startles you: to the extent that you had anticipated "hearing back" from someone else, you had expected them to introduce themselves—not to interrogate *you*.

Arguably there is no possible evidence or perhaps (though this is less certain) even any pragmatic considerations that would rationally *require* you to accept that there really *was* another person, who calls herself Wendy, inside of you. After all, there is always an alternative hypothesis: that *you* are saying and writing and thinking it all and that the fact that things seem otherwise to you merely shows that there is something *wrong* with you. Your experiences might simply be very misleading and abnormal; perhaps psychotherapy will modify them, or at least allow you to live with them while still maintaining that Wendy is just *you* in another mode. Again, this alternative hypothesis will always be available to you, and if you asked your friends, family, or therapist, it is what essentially all of them would say was the case. But this other possible interpretation—the plural premise—might occur to you too.

The story I've given above is more descriptive of DID than of tulpagenic systems, though it's not meant to offer a faithful characterization of DID multiplicity either. (Among other things, the story implies that it is only after however many decades of ordinary singlet experience that you suddenly start undergoing experiences of multiplicity.) But I think the story captures something of the phenomenological basis of plural identity just in general; as Dell (2006b) says, the phenomenology of multiplicity is in large part the

phenomenology of *intrusion*. (Although the word "intrusion" has a negative connotation that is not necessarily accurate to the experiences of multiples who are plurals.)

It might be said that it is much more puzzling how plurals could arrive at the plural premise in cases in which different headmates claim to, e.g., hear each other's voices in inner speech, since this—unlike reading written notes—is something that different persons (it might be said) cannot do, and surely plurals *know* this. But, again, headmates think that the reason that they can hear each other's thoughts is that they share a brain, as different persons ordinarily do not. Were different persons to partially share a brain (as in the case of conjoined twins Krista and Tatiana Hogan), it would not be incredible (though certainly fascinating and philosophically important) if one person could "hear" a sentence in inner speech produced by the other. Indeed, it must be said that the fact that one person cannot move another's body just by forming an intention to move or cause another person to experience a thought just by thinking something themselves is probably just a temporary technological limitation (see Jiang et al. [2019]). Yet it also seems at least a live possibility that someone whose brain and thus whose actions and mental life were subject to another person's influence in this way might still be able to distinguish (fallibly) between "self-caused" versus "other-caused" experiences and actions. (It's an empirical question, of course.)

I think we can see how this plural premise could be more appealing than the alternative *dissociated singlet premise*, especially if the former ended up somehow affording a greater degree of control over and a greater capacity to comprehend one's mental life than would the dissociated singlet premise. Suppose that, once "you and Wendy" began speaking, you managed to reach a "mutually agreed upon" policy regarding who should speak when. I'm using scare quotes here because this is, again, a question-begging way of describing the process of making this policy; if we wanted to speak consistently with a "one person per body" rule, we could say simply that, after thinking about it, you committed yourself to making certain changes in your personal speech practices (rather than saying that you and another party negotiated and came to a mutual agreement about your joint practices going forward). But again, what if you actually found it easier to make this change than you would have if you had, instead, at every moment, insisted upon your being one dissociated person—and initiated a course of intensive psychotherapy to deal with your ongoing feelings of alienation from your own experiences and actions? What if you tried psychotherapy but it didn't seem to work? Or what if the therapy itself were a further source of alienation from your experiences? Or what if your therapist didn't seem to believe or even understand what you were describing? What if it was discouraging to think of yourself in the terms your therapist used—as a fractured person

—and empowering to think of yourself as, psychologically, *just like a singlet*—a unified and unitary psychological being—albeit one whose *embodiment* was different?[18]

I don't hope to have fully illuminated the phenomenology of multiplicity, which remains on some level opaque to me still. This is partly just a general fact about phenomenology: what we can imagine is limited by the basic machinery of our own experiences (Nagel 1971). One singlet who wrote a popular media article on plurals wrote that at some point she:

> …. sat outside at a coffee shop the other day and tried to retreat within my own mind…. I wanted to see if I could imagine others milling around inside my body, but instead, I was overwhelmed by a sense of single occupancy. It felt like my mind, my selfhood, was occupying every square inch of my frame, pressing against the inside of my skull and furling out to the tips of my fingers. I waited for a voice to step out from the shadows and say hello, but there was no room for anyone else. (Telfer 2015)

This is the powerful sense I have as well. But multiples powerfully sense otherwise. My own singlet phenomenology surely does causally contribute to my belief that I am one person; mightn't it help justify that belief as well? *If* so, then perhaps the phenomenology of multiplicity can help justify plural identity.

Of course, the scenarios I described left out an important factor causally contributing to plural identity, in at least many cases: learning about other plurals. Since the "one person per body" rule is hegemonic in our culture, for many plurals (including the ones I spoke to), learning about others who rejected this rule was a necessary step in the development of their own plural identities. (Some plurals however do seem to identify as systems spontaneously; indeed, the plural who is believed to have come up with the *term* "plural" to first describe themselves, as a system, supposedly did so in the 1980s, without having encountered other systems, to their knowledge, and without having heard of multiple personality disorder.[19]) The conceptualization is like a hypothesis or theory, and experiences of feeling as though one were just watching one's body do something, experiences of hearing something in inner speech that is surprising and unrelated to what

18. There is also the fact that psychotherapy is time consuming and expensive. (When it is even available; it can be hard to access psychiatric care for even much more common and well understood conditions.) One traumagenic plural that I spoke to said, effectively, that, sure, maybe 20 years of psychotherapy can manage to integrate all your headmates and allow you to function effectively in daily life—or you could just come talk to *him*—a headmate in a traumagenic but functional plural system—and he could give you advice that would enable you to improve communication between and implement fairer practices among you and your headmates *this week*.

19. My source for this is personal communication, dated January 9, 2023, with the Rings System, who met and conversed with this other system (who wishes to remain anonymous) on February 2, 2019, at the Healing Together Conference in Orlando Florida.

you were just thinking about—these are the data that both support and are explained by the theory.

One could look at this contribution of sociocultural learning in different ways. When Christensen (2022) refers to "sociogenic" cases of plurality, for instance, she means to refer only to *non-traumagenic* systems, and views those cases of plurality as equivalent to (so-called) TikTok-induced functional movement disorder, a condition *distinct* from Tourette's (see e.g., Müller-Vahl et al. [2021]). This depicts "learned" plural identity as unreal somehow. But there are important sociocultural influences on experiences and expressions of voice hearing even in something like schizophrenia, which many take to be the most obviously biologically-based (and in that sense "real") of all the best known mental illnesses. Luhrmann et al. refer to "social kindling" as the "implicit and explicit ways in which a local social world gives significance and meaning to sensation (such as hallucination) [and that] will alter not only the way those sensations are interpreted but the likelihood and quality of the sensation itself" (2015, 13). Sociocultural influences might lead to heard voices and other phenomenological abnormalities being conceived of as the voices of others—might even contribute to and alter such experiences—while those abnormalities still had independent existence.

And, crucially, it should be possible to acknowledge sociocultural contributions to plural identity even while arguing that such identities are *true*. There are sociocultural contributions to singlet identity, after all; anyway, people learn true theories from each other as well as false ones. Moreover, when we are talking about persons—who arguably owe their existence to social practices and attitudes just in general—it doesn't seem *a priori* impossible that new practices and attitudes could create new persons—headmates as opposed to human beings.

7 Conclusion

This paper has attempted to introduce a small and surprising population to the philosophical community: the population of human beings who, in a sense I have tried to explain, identify as multiple people sharing a brain. I have tried to describe the contours and basis of the plural identity claim, though I have also noted some difficulties in making sense of that claim from a singlet's perspective. I have tried to distinguish the population of plurals from the population of human beings with DID and have offered some potential explanations for the overlap between plural, transgender, and autistic identities.

I have not defended the claim that a plural is multiple people or even that it is *possible* for a single human being to be multiple people, but I have argued that the claim cannot be dismissed out of hand. I have also described some scenarios meant to evoke, for sin-

glets, something of the phenomenological basis for the development of plural identity. The purpose of doing this has been to try to illuminate plurals' own perspectives on their mental lives and identities. An investigation of the actual metaphysical status of the plural identity claim would have to tackle not only metaphysical debates about the nature of persons generally, as well as psychological and (perhaps) neural facts about plurals, but also the deeply ethical nature of our concerns about personal identity, since almost all of our ethical assumptions and attitudes presuppose the "one person per body" rule that plurals claim does not apply in their cases.

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